

This Isn't Even My Final Form

Jon Love

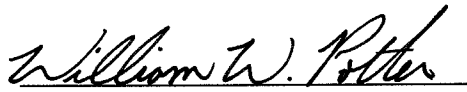
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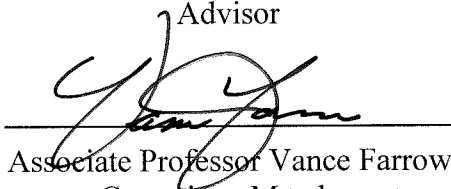
This Isn't Even My Final Form

By
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Master of Fine Arts

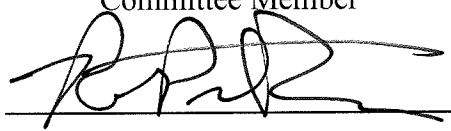
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You Are Amid Waves

...but lurching towards a coast finally. These are not like where you have been, where the water swells and sinks without clear motive. You are pulled, almost gravitationally, towards a solidity you can barely remember. You know that the human body is, like, 65 percent water, and now you are terrified of reaching shore. You imagine your body as a dried-up husk; your soul has been squeezed out like toothpaste and lies there next to you. You scream three words. They are: 'I feel fine.'

The previous is an excerpt of the narration from a large projected video piece within my thesis exhibition, *This Isn't Even My Final Form*. This section of the video is paired with appropriated footage of a sunset on the Pacific Ocean with waves lapping up on shore. The narration is a poetic and metaphorical interpretation of various aspects of French Philosopher Gilles Deleuze's idea of becoming and how it is expressed within humans in a contemporary world that is highly integrated with digital technologies. Deleuze plays a big part in my philosophical worldview, and thus similarly in my art practice and in this paper. Though he died before the mass integration of the Internet, his work represents for me the most lucid understanding of the effects of net culture on contemporary human life. I will discuss my usage of his concept of the rhizome, a concept which describes the basic structure of peer-to-peer networks, of the actual and virtual, and again, here, of "becoming."

The protagonist whom the narrator addresses floats in a sea of ontological possibilities. This protagonist is unmoored from a firmly defined reality of his own being. As he churns among the waves he continually reorients himself, assessing where he will next be thrown. Shore beckons, threatening fixity, but he is, "like, 65 percent water," and this state of becoming defines his nature, his home. Shore means death. This ocean exists both within the philosophical struggle to define one's self and one's reality, as both are in tension with one

another in perpetually unfinished states of becoming. This particular section of this video within the exhibition represents my ongoing investigation into the nature of reality within an art practice that is also an orientation towards the world as I see it. The ideas presented here are thus in a perpetual beta-state, unfixed as I am. This isn't even my final form.

I feel fine.

Life in an Augmented Reality

Augmented reality is the merging of material reality with digital information. This means that our world is composed of a virtual component (e.g. the Internet) and a physical component (obvious). These are not the same thing, but our ability to understand the world and our place within it is rendered incomprehensible without one or the other. This worldview is non-hierarchical; it understands what happens on a screen to be no more or less real or vital than what happens IRL.¹ My work is an exploration of the consequences of an interconnected existence in which we live on and offline simultaneously. Such consideration is both urgent and essential as our material lives trend towards even further enmeshment with the virtual. We must consciously define a space for the human to exist between the Luddite and the cyborg.²

My project thus claims at the outset that this augmented reality viewpoint is true and then attempts to work through the major aspects of human life whose nature has fundamentally changed as a result. I am addressing the questions of how selfhood, empathy, religion, and one's sense of place play out as they stretch along multiple vectors across landscapes which are both actual and virtual. This is not virtual reality of the terrible

¹ IRL is an initialism standing for "In Real Life" which is generally used to distinguish what happens online from anything that happens away from a screen. I'm arguing here that the term is a misnomer, and that the experiences you have while sitting in front of a computer are really real.

² Here I'm referring to cyborgs in the apocalyptic sci-fi manner in which the "human" is resigned to a secondary position with regard to their own technological inventions. We have computers in our pockets most of our waking lives, and in some sense are already cyborgs.

1980/90's clunky-headset-dripping-with-wires vein, but rather Deleuze's conception of the reality *of* the virtual, that is, the virtual as defined by its real effects and consequences, as well as the actual's inextricable links to its virtual potentialities. Deleuze states, "Purely actual objects do not exist. Every actual surrounds itself with a cloud of virtual images."³ Therefore the actual is defined by, and incomprehensible without, consideration of its virtual images. He also states, "there is coalescence and division, or rather oscillation, a perpetual exchange between the actual object and its virtual image: the virtual never stops becoming actual."⁴ So the conversation between the actual and virtual is a true and truly equal dialog.

The Medium is the Message: Augmented Drawings

Artistic production is of the same reality in which we live and is thus subject to similar issues regarding its enmeshed material and immaterial existence. The pieces within the physical manifestation of my thesis exhibition consist of photo-realistically rendered graphite drawings overlaid with digitally projected videos – a simple conceptual gesture which highlights the interdependence of their constituent parts. To extend the metaphor to the human, each physical component of the works, the drawings themselves as well as the tangible components of the technology (e.g. the projectors), represent the physical reality of the body. While the videos including the many cultural references within them that extend beyond their borders could be called the soul. Here's a spooky metaphor: without the projections the drawings could be called corpses; inert, too knowable to pose interesting questions, dead things cast ashore. Without the drawings the videos become ghosts. They are too abstract, when you reach out your hand passes right through. The drawn/projected aspect of the work is also inextricably linked with its presentation in an online space, and this is

³ Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, "The Actual and the Virtual," In *Dialogues*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 148.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 150.

where the case for the “truth” of augmented reality is most fully made. My exhibition exists simultaneously at a physical address and web address and both are primary experiences of it.

With media visionary Marshall McLuhan’s famous phrase, “the medium is the message,”⁵ in mind, I’ve taken the liberty of labeling the medium of these pieces “augmented drawings,” in order to provide the necessary contextualization of the augmented reality framework as the foundation onto which further conceptual ideas may be built. Discussing television, McLuhan said that the content within any program ultimately had less impact than what the medium of presentation (TV itself) was communicating. In his global village concept, we are all connected with one another in an environment which de-emphasizes geopolitical distinctions. This was a prediction he first laid it out in the 1960s. Later, with the advent of the Internet, communication and the potential for human connection/interaction is nearly instant and truly global. Everyday more people gain access to the global village as this potential actualizes.

Ultimately the Internet is not a form of media but instead a *place* where real things happen – a place which has its own folklore, vernacular, and an immense number of fully formed subcultures. Some of these subcultures spill out into physical space, though whether they do or do not has no bearing on their authenticity. In this light, my multi-media installation could be said to be something of a landscape painting that focuses heavily on the *meta*-investigation of figure-ground relationships. I take the role of a self-aware figure within a landscape consisting of social media interfaces, webpages, and the like overlaid onto physical space. With another step back, the audience is there watching him/me wrestle with the big questions within the representation of reality which he/I created (the exhibition itself), but which both reflects and affects both the viewers’ and my own actual reality.

⁵ Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium Is the Massage*. (New York: Bantam Books, 1967).

The historical artwork coming closest to the tone that the exhibition aspires to is Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* viewed on an iPad. This Romantic painting features a lone figure standing atop a rocky ledge with his back to the viewer, and peering out over a landscape enshrouded in fog. Here I am, the introspective figure within two inextricably linked landscapes, the naturalistic one within the painting framed by the digital one of the device's screen. You are there to witness my experience and also consider your own. If my investigation feels authentic to the audience then our virtual human connection actualizes across time and space in spite of multiple layers of mediation.

Goth Dads and Empathy Online

The piece within my exhibition that has the most complex relationship with the augmented reality concept is *Goth Dads*, a work consisting of two large graphite drawings, a projected video, and a website, gothdads.com.⁶ An ongoing aspect of my art practice involves regular searches for available domain names, an activity revealing, in some sense, what is or is not valued in our heavily capitalistic society (among many other bits of data). By purchasing the gothdads site, I essentially created a virtual void to be filled. The work made to fill that void examined, on one hand, television tropes and character archetypes, and on the other, the nature of empathy in the digital age. The initial response to this prompt was to create photoshopped versions of TV dads as members of the Goth subculture. This meant giving the images of various actors who've played famous sitcom dads facial piercings, black lipstick, eye shadow, etc. The resulting clumsily gothified⁷ images of Andy Griffith, from the *Andy Griffith Show* era, and John Goodman, from his time as Dan Connor on *Roseanne*, were

⁶ Refer to Fig. 1 in the ILLUSTRATIONS section.

⁷ An underlying narrative I'm developing in this piece is that of a father whose son has tried to rebel by becoming goth, a decision which was only met with empathy from his exceptionally understanding father. As a sign of solidarity, the father tries to join his son by becoming similarly goth, doing so by looking up Youtube tutorials on the subject. He hopes they can paint their nails black together, maybe?

then photorealistically rendered with graphite on paper in large scale. As with the rest of the augmented drawings, a video was then made to project onto the drawn components. One scene in the video shows multiple fabricated banner advertisements which parody search optimization algorithms. These technologies are used primarily for driving consumerist tendencies, but could be considered computer simulations of empathy in that they do attempt to understand users, though again primarily to commercial ends. The banner ads were constructed under the premise that they would be targeted towards Internet-users who identify as both dads and as part of the goth subculture. This scene then served as the model for the online version at gothdads.com with the parodic banner ads now allowing for interaction thus functioning as real banner ads, albeit ones stripped of their consumerist faculties. The process of this work's creation, having been developed out into actual and virtual spaces essentially dialogically, is further witness in my work to the inseparability of our enmeshed augmented reality.

Information Overload(?)

Information overload is something of a journalistic buzzword denoting a high velocity media environment whose sensory effects are exacerbated by information technologies to the point of overstimulation. When inundated by information, the brain emphasizes the recognition of pattern over discrete detail. With the amount of information we're forced to deal with at any time in contemporary life, on-screen or off, we've become better at this form of mental processing. A societal consequence is the general unwillingness to devote large swaths of time to any one discrete packet of information. In art-world terms, this discrete packet could mean an individual artwork of the "Modernist masterpiece" variety. Contrary to those who might bemoan the shrinking attention spans within society,

this is *not* inherently good or bad, but is merely adaptation to one's environment. We now perceive and construct meaning through the recognition of patterns and emphases through diffuse attention spans.

Many of the structural considerations of my augmented drawings are with the contemporary media environment in mind. The projected videos are seamlessly looped, thus don't have distinct beginning or end points, and are meant to be viewed multiple times. The works aim to mesmerize, changing often enough to maintain active interest. By resonating on the hypertrophied pattern-recognizing parts of viewers' brains, the hard work of concentrated effort of thought is made more manageable. The temporal quality added by the projections allows each piece the potential to introduce symbols or motifs which both develop into and reveal systems of meaning over time.

On Rhizomes

Augmented drawings are rhizomes. A rhizome is a botanical root structure that can grow in any direction, and can reform itself after being severed.⁸ When used in Deleuzian philosophy, the rhizome is a visual metaphor for theory or research that allows for multiple non-hierarchical entry and exit points in its representation and interpretation. In the philosophical rhizome, all data is interconnected. This concept expands the boundaries of the individual pieces within the exhibition as they bleed into and perpetually recontextualize one another. The opposing metaphor describes the more solidly defined Modernist conception of the art object. This is the arborescent or tree-like model whose monolithic trunk dominates the definition of any artwork by imposing a strict hierarchy that necessarily closes off further connections. In the arborescent model, the art object becomes a masterpiece through achievement of some highly valued aesthetic principle in part by *not being* other lesser

⁸ A few examples of botanical rhizomes: potatoes, ginger, lotus roots

examples of the same. Within a rhizomatic approach, hierarchies and their superlative qualifications are nonsensical as artworks are only judged on their capacities to forge connections between things, including other artworks.

The entire exhibition itself is effectively a rhizome whose boundaries extend beyond the visual borders determined by the physical space it occupies. The exhibition forges outside connections with myriad cultural references, which have their own established contexts. Knowing these references is not required of the viewer to engage with the work, but only with them does the work approach its most complete existence.⁹ The same is true for the presentation of the work online. The virtual space allows for more connective potential, the assimilation of more contexts, and added complexity. To extend the rhizomatic metaphor again back to the human, we can expand beyond our physical realities with virtual representation and extend the bounds of our identities. There is no circle big enough to describe the limits of a contemporary Vitruvian man. The ocean of potentialities is infinite.

How Do You Know When You're Finished?

“The horrific struggle to establish a human self results in a self whose humanity is inseparable from that horrific struggle: that our endless and impossible journey toward home is in fact our home.”¹⁰ - David Foster Wallace on Franz Kafka

Consider again the metaphor that projection¹¹ is the soul, then the possibility that, from exhibition to exhibition, entirely different videos can be shown with the same drawn component represents within the work a productive instability of definition as it subsumes additional meanings and contexts through its perpetual mutation. The artwork can serve as a

⁹ For instance, one does not need to know who Andy Griffith is to “get” the work, but understanding him as the prototypical “wholesome dad” TV archetype/trope extends the potential for rhizomatic connectivity.

¹⁰ David Foster Wallace, “Laughing With Kafka.” *Harper's*, 1 July 1998, 27.

¹¹ Meaning both the literal projected video, and projection into the space of (pop-)cultural reference.

1:1 stand-in for the human when one's conception of "selfhood" is similarly malleable and pluralistic. Deleuze's idea of the "dividual" comes to the fore. The dividual is multi-egoic. We dividuals exist in perpetual states of becoming ourselves (our *selves*). With the advent of digital technologies, we were given more obvious control over this process of becoming. The representation of the self-online allows for a deeper investigation of selfhood in which latent expressivities can be more easily realized. This experimental broadening of self can take on many different forms, from the simple aesthetic decisions which go into choosing a Facebook profile picture, to gender bending in online games or forums, to the development of fully fleshed-out avatars for use across multiple platforms.

This Isn't Even My Final Form attempts to realize a multiplicitous understanding of the self as an increasingly complex (and ongoing) project within an expansive augmented reality¹² after the metaphysical templates previously given to us by religion and nationalism have dissolved. We strive for meaningful existences within a postmodern world that does not provide a good or obvious template, so we constantly mutate or disappear.

Also, make no mistake, these expressions of the self, part of Deleuze's "cloud of virtual images," are manifestations of the *real*.

Wall of Self/-Portraits

Now, how are we to connect with one another when there is an inherent inability to experience the consciousness of someone else? Even through face-to-face conversation, where two or more people can receive every aspect of human communication [verbal (including intonation, etc.) and non-verbal (body language, etc.)], there is no direct way to translate internal states verbatim. In this way, all human communication is mediated primarily and most obviously through language. The dire eventuality of these circumstances

¹² Again, the word "self" could be replaced by the word "artwork" and ring just as true.

is solipsism, and unfortunately the problem of solipsism is exacerbated by greater obfuscation of the other caused by further mediation. However, I believe that art that can address the contemporary human condition has a unique ability to overcome this solipsistic impulse.

As mentioned earlier, this exhibition presents my understanding of self within a digital landscape of sorts, and the most obvious way in which I am interjected is through literal self-portraiture. Two of the drawn components of the three Augmented Drawings within the exhibition are self-portraits. The video accompaniment to the first, titled *One's Own Devices*¹³, shows a social media interface (modeled on Facebook-owned application Instagram) which prompts its user to choose from a selection of photo filters which will broadcast their desired expressive qualities. The benign photographic contrast, saturation, or brightness alterations that the actual Instagram filters provide have been replaced by deeper ontological questions in the form of representationally similar filters of my own construction. “Heaven, Purgatory, and Hell” filters let the user within the video become their own eternal judge. With a “NOT-NSA” filter, parody is used to reveal some of the unpleasant subtext inherent within a “free” application whose users and their information are its real product. These are just a few of the filters I constructed for this piece, which again ties into the rhizomatic ideal in which each work can absorb multiple contexts into a more complex representation of the overall project. The goal with this piece is to strip away enough layers from social media applications in order to find what is really being longed for through their use – which is, as far as I can tell, a connection to one’s society at a level deeper than the applications’ ubiquitous “likes.” This is not a damnation of social media, as I’ve claimed that real connection happens through its various iterations, but we must be aware of the ways in

¹³ Refer to Fig. 2 in the ILLUSTRATIONS section.

which they turn us inward towards solipsism, as well as the ways in which they turn us into data for harvest.

The other drawn self-portrait, eponymously titled *This Isn't Even My Final Form*¹⁴, tackles questions of spiritual or religious longing as they are played out through technological mediation. The portrait was drawn with a circular void in the middle of its forehead into which the Apple computer spinning pinwheel icon is projected for the majority of the video. The location of this icon evokes consideration of the “third eye” of various Eastern religions. One of the video’s scenes projects an elaborate gilded frame surrounded by moving arms giving the affirming “thumbs up” hand gesture; the arms themselves referencing depictions of Hindu deities, while the frame points to the art world’s own conventions and rituals. The commingling of religious and artistic symbols investigates the ways in which we attempt to construct or impose meaning on our lives. Three divergent but interconnected lines of thought immediately come to mind here. 1.) The effects of digitization on organized religion 2.) The art world as organized religion’s secular twin – the Cain to its Abel 3.) The “thumbs up” gesture, a reference to the symbol used as visual aid to the Facebook “Like,” as both a nod to the paradoxical pairing within the contemporary artist of crippling self-doubt and unbelievable narcissism, and to social media’s exacerbation of the same narcissism problem as we become the figureheads (in some sense literally) of our own cult of curated self.¹⁵

By representing myself within the hyperactive contemporary media landscape, the

¹⁴ Refer to Fig. 3 in the ILLUSTRATIONS section.

¹⁵ Nearly every image or symbol used in my exhibition has numerous references which could lead, at any juncture, to these types of parallel conversations. Due to both self and administratively imposed limits on page length, I am unable to follow many of these sprawling tangential-but-still-important threads presented within the exhibition.

viewer may recognize that the creator of the work in front of them is a real human being experiencing all the trappings such an existence entails, and in the aesthetic vernacular of the net-generation. The result of this approach is that when confronted with so much information in the form of both drawn and projected images, the viewer simultaneously recognizes the presence of another mind at work, and feels the anxiety such a glut of information causes. This is no easy task, but in attempting to break down the wall of self, I find this method of showing both how I think, and of recreating the anxious feeling I get from my own mediated existence to be the approach that feels most sincere.

The utilization of humor in my work has the same end-goal, to break down the wall of self, but goes about it in a nearly antithetical way. The premise on which humor works, exformation, requires there to be a certain amount of information deliberately left out, yet both implied and contextually shared between the one relating the humor and the one receiving it¹⁶. The result, if done well, is an explosion of neuron-firing realizations and connections which give the punchline its *punch*. My work is soaked in references to any number of aspects of the cultural/pop-cultural landscape but has enough trust in the viewer to deal with the ambiguities necessary for humor – maximalism without explaining the jokes. Humor is the most forceful and direct route I see through the solipsistic barriers constructed around our consciousnesses.

This exhibition is in some sense an attempt to become a more objective viewer, to distance myself *from* myself. I am stuck so far within my own head and behind my wall of self that I have difficulty addressing my questions regarding “reality” and “existence” and “art” and “selfhood,” which only seem to become meaningful through human communion. The paradox is that my attempt to defeat solipsism through my work comes in the form of an

¹⁶ Explained another way: a joke is never funny when it has to be explained.

elaborately constructed and mediated presentation of the question of solipsism itself. The aspirational understanding of one's self, the Deleuzian dividual, becomes impossible for the solipsist. For if we cannot imagine the existence of other minds, the virtual others which exist within us also vanish – the broad rhizomatic multiplicity of self is violently singularized.

Homo Ex Machina OR I Follow God On Twitter

This exhibition is ultimately an unorthodox form of prayer – the experience of a Midwestern kid who was raised Catholic. Who found the religion's dogma reductive and out of touch with his experience of a reality constantly mediated by digital technologies, but its message of kindness and empathy useful. He just wants to be able to love and to be loved and understood by the people around him. The work is not *about* technology. The work is about the potential for human connection. Technology gives the color to the lens through which my relationship to the world is filtered – what you see is that experience given back.

While Deleuze's fluid concepts of becoming, rhizome, and dividuality have influenced my work. The late author David Foster Wallace has been instrumental in many of the more grounded aspects, those of religion, prayer, and solipsism. Though the videos in the exhibition are created to begin at any point in order to fit the rhizomatic ideal, the nature of the technology is that the digital .mov files have distinct beginning and end points. The very beginning of the largest projected video within the exhibition begins as this paper does, "You are amid waves..." and ends with a quote from a short story by Wallace called *Forever Overhead*. The story focuses on a boy on his 13th birthday as he is preparing to jump off the high dive for the first time. The story puts emphasis on the sensory experiences of the boy, such as a description of his feeling his full weight against the diving board's ladder's thin rungs. We empathize a great deal with our protagonist, but beneath a lot of physical and

environmental description, many big ideas are explored in the story [our perception of time (moving only forward as a diving board queue), our experience of thresholds¹⁷, potentialities collapsing into fixity, etc.] Wallace's protagonist thinks very hard, but none of that hard thought allows him to transcend his physical reality within his time and place.

The story ends just before the boy plunges into the water. After the video's final line is uttered, the projection restarts, and we're submerged again, visually, into a virtual sea of possibilities, again amid waves. And so *Forever Overhead, You Are Amid Waves*, and this paper all end with a simple greeting as we both begin and continue the cycle of becoming in constant tension with our actualizations.

“Hello.”

¹⁷ Zeno's arrow paradox is evoked – an arrow must always reach a halfway point between its current location and its target ad infinitum, therefore never actually reaching the target. How do you know when you're finished?

ILLUSTRATIONS



Fig. 1. *Goth Dads*, Single channel video over two graphite drawings, 72"x128", 2015

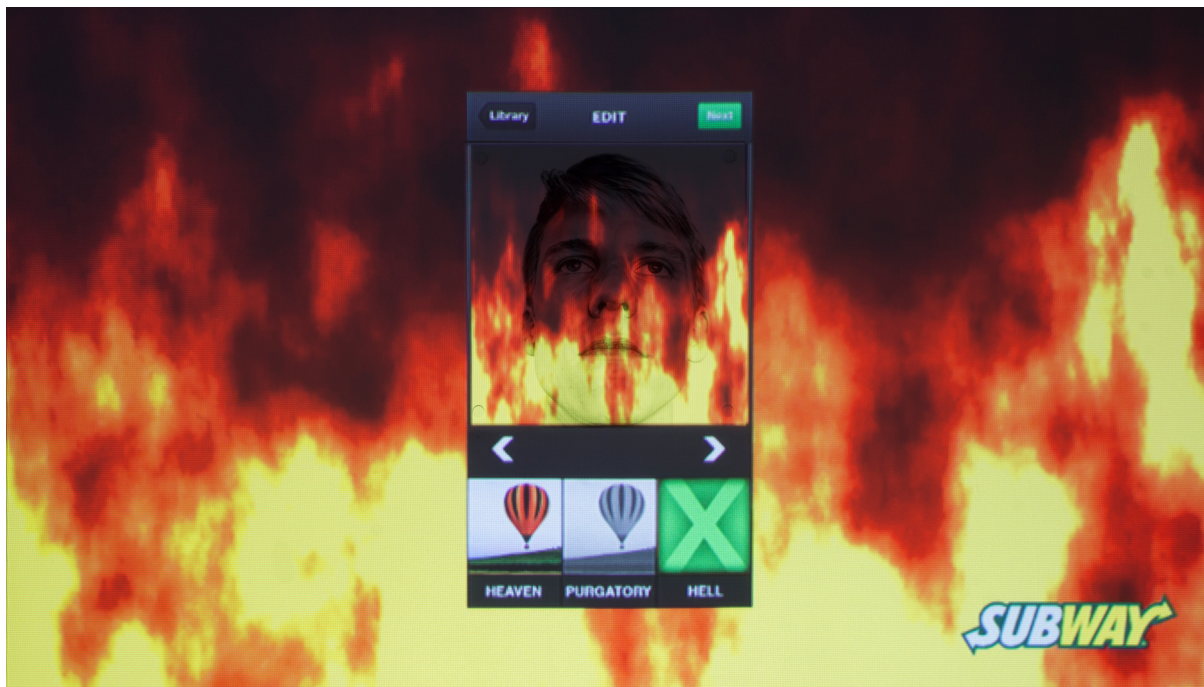


Fig. 2. *One's Own Devices*, Single channel video over graphite drawing, 44"x76", 2015



Fig. 3. *This Isn't Even My Final Form*, Single channel video over graphite drawing, 37"x66", 2015

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